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**We Will Always Be Here**

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**We Will Always Be Here**

by

**Monique Walton, B.A.**

**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

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## **Dedication**

To my grandmother, Maria Ramirez, for her support and unwavering faith in me.



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This project could not have been completed without the dedicated and exhilarating guidance of my thesis chair and mentor, Nancy Schiesari. Her passionate energy motivated me to remain at the edge of my comfort zone and to trust my instincts throughout this process. I am grateful to Paul Stekler for his creative and professional insight with this film and my previous filmic endeavors. Charles Anderson inspired me to move my body in order to tell a story to the world, and I was transformed as an artist as a result. Susanne Kraft, Keefe Boerner and Jeremy Gruy solved every technical problem along the way including brightening my spirits when morale was low.

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## **Abstract**

### **We Will Always Be Here**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

Supervisor: Nancy Schiesari

This report serves as a first-person account of the conceptualization, pre-production, and post-production phases of my short documentary thesis film. *We Will Always Be Here* interweaves stories from residents, historians, and grassroots activists in a visual essay about the transforming landscape in the rapidly expanding neighborhood of East Austin. The film explores themes of identity politics and cultural resistance amid the seemingly unstoppable expansion of the city of Austin.

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## Introduction

You provoke the audience to complete a circle of which you've only drawn a part. Each person being unique, they will complete that in their own way. When they have done that, the wonderful part of it is that they re-project that completion onto the film. They actually are seeing a film that they are, in part, creating: both in terms of juxtaposition of images and, then, juxtaposition of sound versus image and, then, image following sound and all kinds of those variations.

– Walter Murch<sup>1</sup>

There are some things more important than profit.

- James Baldwin<sup>2</sup>

When I decided to move to Austin to pursue a graduate degree, I lived in a state of denial that I was really moving to Texas. The City of Austin does a good job of representing the 'blue oasis' by fostering an alternative, eco-friendly liberal patina that applauds local business, live music, and a culture of health and wellness. But behind this marketing of inclusion and growth was an institutionalized segregated cultural past that had emerged at the center of the gentrification debate. City council member Mike Martinez and Mayor Pro Tem Sheryl Cole frequently referred to the bifurcated city as "The Austin we show and the Austin we know" and as a city of "The have and the have-nots"<sup>3</sup> to publicly address the ways in which rapid expansion was shifting the demographics of the city and deepening the socio-economic divide. The dissonance that

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Jarrett, "Sound Doctrine: An Interview with Walter Murch," *Film Quarterly* 53 (2000): 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Take This Hammer*, directed by Richard O. Moore. (1963, San Francisco, CA: KQED, 1964.)

<sup>3</sup> Martinez and Cole, comment, "APD Community Walk." Austin, TX. May 4, 2013.

came with moving to a city experiencing a cultural explosion was palpable from the moment that I settled in.

I welcomed the opportunity to uproot my relatively stable lifestyle as a web video producer in NY in pursuit of a more unregulated creative path. Along the way I learned about the ways that I work best collaboratively, and the conditions under which I am creatively most proficient. It has been interesting for me to look back at my past two short films and trace their initial seeds to specific conversations. For my pre-thesis film, *The Becoming Box*, that conversation occurred late one night with my co-writer Paavo Hanninen. What began as a discussion about the portals and identity shifts blossomed into a sci-fi narrative about overcoming trauma. For *We Will Always Be Here* there were early conversations with my father that sparked ideas that would eventually work themselves into the film.

It was the day after my parents helped me move in that my father jokingly asked over pancakes at Kerbey Lane, “Austin is nice - but where are all the black people?” The African American community was nowhere to be seen, and black-owned businesses were few and far between. When I searched for apartments I was steered away from the east side of town by realtors and locals alike; even in 2009 it was deemed a dangerous place to live, and moreso for a single woman from out of town. I noticed that the east side was the only place I saw an African American community. Having lived in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn in a neighborhood undergoing a similar transformation, I understood the thinly veiled language of real estate and was curious to delve deeper into what initially felt like a buried history.

Documentary short stories about life on the east side turned out to not be so buried after all. Even within the RTF program an undergraduate class led by Andy Garrison focused specifically on the telling of “East Side Stories”. The sense that these stories needed to be told and archived extended to the city’s official efforts as well. In 2012, the Austin History Center exhibited an extensive collection of the first 100 years of the African American community in Austin. In 2013, the city celebrated the opening of the African American Cultural and Heritage Center on East 11<sup>th</sup> St., a facility built around one of the oldest homes on the east side, originally owned by a former slave. I considered delving into these stories to find a launch point for a potential film.

Beyond my research I observed a concerted effort to discuss, critique, and research gentrification at the university. The LBJ school of Public Affairs at UT hosted a series called *The Gentrification Forum* to highlight the concerns of rapid development and displacement in Austin. At one of these events, a presentation on the forced removal of the Mexican population from a rundown apartment complex on East Riverside, one comment from a Mexican-American audience member stuck with me (paraphrased): “This isn’t gentrification, it’s genocide...and students at UT study us to death. If you are coming to our neighborhood, have some respect for the community you are entering”. What followed was a brief moment of uncomfortable acknowledgement – he had said something that could have effectively ended the forum because it was true. While these underserved communities welcomed an effort to get their stories out, there was also a sense of fatigue, specifically from UT students doing research for the ivory tower. There are many articles that lamented ‘what used to be’ in East Austin. But rather than focus on

the past, I hoped to find a story that would reflect the one aspect of the present state of affairs in that area.

I was aware that gentrification was a hot-button social issue that most people living in or around urban centers would have preconceived notions about. It has been happening across the country for well over a decade and it shows no sign of stopping, as long as city centers continue becoming more desirable places to live. Because the process has been happening in a swift and unrelenting manner in Austin, I hoped that by presenting what Murch calls ‘a part of the circle’, I could engage the audience in a dialogue about the wider consequences of this socioeconomic shift. One personal challenge as a recent transplant was shaping my filming approach to maintain both a sense of respect and critique. I wanted to develop a film that honored a rich cultural past, was grounded in the present, and expressed uncertainty about the future.

### **Shaping the Approach**

My films wrestle with ideas of identity and belonging. I try to make films from a visceral place – I want to explore emotions that are powerful, recurring, and often abstruse. Though I haven’t put myself directly into any of my films as a character, I consider all of my work to be deeply personal and reflective of where I am in my life at any given time. Making a social-issue documentary from a personal place can be a hindrance to the story, but in order to put forth the effort necessary to produce a film, I needed to have that emotional drive at my core.

In *We Will Always Be Here* I was driven by my own ambiguous relationship to the culture and rhetoric of urban re-development. On one hand I felt a sense of erasure,



displacement, forced upheaval, and dismissal of a community that comes with the “land grab” mentality. However I also understood the necessity for growth and evolution during the unstoppable expansion of the city. As a creative professional from NY, I was part of the core demographic being marketed to when new cafes, shops and restaurants opened up in the area. I wasn’t immune to the appeal – but I kept wondering at what cost do these amenities come?

Gentrification was a complex process with many competing and intersecting transactions, but one thing was certain: while the overall population grew exponentially, the African American population in Austin was dwindling - families were leaving and they weren’t coming back. I wanted to find a way to access this story with a level of specificity that harkened back to the bigger picture.

## Conceptualization

### Early Pitches

The first pitch I developed around the subject of gentrification was entitled *Finding Negro: The Musical*. The title reflected a satirical tone – a comedic way to disarm the viewer into engaging with a polemical topic. Participatory action documentaries really appealed to me because of the way in which the documentary subject was empowered to take the reins on how their story was told. Finding musicians wouldn't be an issue - as the self-proclaimed "Live Music Capital of the World", there would be no shortage of performers to track down and recruit. This concept was largely outside of my comfort zone and would have required a steep learning curve to incorporate the performance elements. I would also need to assemble a fairly large and strong team of songwriters, choreographers, and dancers. Though I was sufficiently inspired by the idea, I ultimately determined that the scope surpassed the parameters of a thesis film. If I decide to pursue this project in the future, I want to be able to take time necessary to meet the right collaborators and allow the process to evolve organically. I was also apprehensive about using a satirical tone to broach the subject of gentrification. I was an outsider and lacked the intimate familiarity with the neighborhood that would allow me to capture the nuances of a satire in a playful and respectful fashion. I was also apprehensive about the audience for the film, and I didn't want the provocative tone to undermine the message. All of these factors led me to table the idea for the time being and pursue other options.

I wanted to find strong characters to ground the film in reality and provide the audience with an insightful perspective on this multilayered subject. For my KA documentary, *The Fire Inside*, I found my main character, firefighter Nona Allen, through an article about her litigation in the Austin Chronicle. We met up prior to shooting, and I could tell instinctively that she would be amenable to the process. She was very down to earth and unreserved, and she was emphatic about getting her story out to a wider audience in Austin and beyond. She believed in the power of documentary film to bring about change, and she was committed to changing society's perception of who a firefighter could and should be. Her presence on camera was understated, but felt genuine and unique. I wanted to find someone with her sense of drive to carry through this story.

I began to search for characters through official channels in 2011. One of my early meetings was with Lisa Byrd, the director of the ProArts Collective. Though she wasn't interested in being on camera, she delivered a concise perspective on the trajectory of the African American community on the east side. She surmised that the turning point for the community occurred in the eighties, during a time of wide-spread drug use, when the middle class left the area in droves, and many businesses closed as a consequence. She also told me about the development of an African American Cultural and Heritage Center sponsored by the City of Austin that would open during the 2012 Juneteenth celebration. I considered using the opening of the facility as a framework; if I had begun shooting in fall of 2011, I would have had ample time to develop a story

around the people involved in the creation of the center. I would also have a built-in story arc that culminated in a hopeful celebration.

### **A Visit to Orun**

After I met with Lisa, construction on the new building stalled, and I began searching for other options. A friend invited me to a screening at the Orun Cultural Center for the Arts, located at the time on Cedar Ave. and E. 14<sup>th</sup> St., and it was there that I met co-founders Dorian Layssard and Angela Alexander. After a screening of *The Interrupters*, a lively discussion ensued and I began to see potential documentary subjects emerge. They were grassroots organizers working to transform the community through Afro-centric cultural development. Dorian grew up in East Austin and had a history of drug dealing on the infamous 12<sup>th</sup> St. and Chicon intersection before turning his life around on a path to spiritual enlightenment. They possessed a determined sense of idealism through cultural education. When they mentioned that they'd soon be moving the center over to 12<sup>th</sup> St. and Salina, I saw an opportunity to pursue a story with a built-in arc.

Dorian and Angela were open to the idea of their stories being filmed, and we scheduled some time for me to shoot while they moved into the new building. I decided to begin this project as a “one-woman band” for a few reasons: I wanted to become better at shooting verité footage, I wanted to develop a production workflow for short content that I could continue to use after school, and I wanted to build and maintain a sense of trust with my documentary subjects. I was also aware of the political dynamics within the neighborhood. Their new location was situated a block away from a notoriously

active drug market, and regular foot traffic was to be expected. I wanted to look as unofficial as possible and didn't want a sound recordist or silent producer standing by. In hindsight there were times when I could've used the help, especially during events that required some coordination. But at the very least, the sink or swim method of shooting my own project gave me the confidence I needed to move forward independently after graduate school. It can be difficult to prepare for a professional career in film while trying to develop and shape your artistic voice, and this was a practical way to combine technical and creative skills.

### **Aesthetic Plan**

As for an aesthetic approach, I had a loose set of rules to abide by. I knew that I wanted to avoid the sit-down interview in favor of capturing candid conversations. My goal was to allow for honest interactions that felt grounded in the present moment. Dorian and Angela were much more relaxed during casual conversation than they were in formal interviews. Even when I conducted informal interviews to camera there was a noticeable change in their demeanor. Dorian became much more self aware and protective of his image during these times. But during conversations with other folks they were able to let their guard down and allow their magnetic personalities rise to the surface. I also found that conversations between Dorian and his barbershop customers for example, were more insightful. He was always aware of the camera, but shooting him while he was cutting hair gave him space to open up. I shot one of the key interviews with Dorian in the film over the course of a few hours of haircutting, and it was one of the more free flowing conversations we had during the course of the project.

I wanted the piece to have an informal feel to it, as if the audience was being given the privilege to witness frank discussions that frequently occur in sacred spaces. These voices would work to counterpoint the politically correct lip service seen in news stories, academic articles, and city council presentations. Gentrification was affecting whole communities on a large scale and individuals and families on a micro scale, and the frankness of the tone would make a complex topic accessible on an emotional level.

## **Production**

I began shooting in early May 2012 as Dorian and Angela recruited volunteers to help renovate the new space, and I was inspired by the enthusiasm in the room. People were excited about the space, and passersby stopped in regularly to inquire about the new agenda. At that point I was shooting with a Canon 7D and a mounted shotgun microphone. Recording sound was an issue since it cannot be monitored nor controlled with that camera. A lot of footage wasn't usable due to spotty sound, so I opted to find a better camera option. I settled on the Sony EX3 and later EX1 and I also used the Panasonic HMC-150 for last minute shoots.

I would often check in with Dorian and Angela to stay updated with their weekly plans, and sometimes I would just drop by uninvited. Without a script, it was becoming difficult to prioritize which events needed to be documented and which didn't. I spent as much time as I could just hanging around the area, getting to know the volunteers and patrons, and talking to other community members. I met L.D. on one such occasion, and he became instrumental in introducing me to the business owners of the older establishments on the block. As someone who had been on the block for at least five decades, L.D. provided a wealth of historical information and knowledge about the residents that it would've taken months for me to obtain on my own. Though his testimony didn't make it into the final cut, his contribution was essential to the development of the story.

As things progressed at the cultural center, I began to see a potential storyline taking shape. I had recorded some wonderful sequences of folks in the neighborhood

stopping by and inquiring about the center, and I envisioned that these interactions would function as a way to reveal how the community was adjusting to and welcoming the presence of Orun on the block. All along the way, Dorian and Angela were devising strategies for raising money to pay the rent. They had fundraiser parties, garage sales, and they even considered having a good old-fashioned car wash. People would often come by just to hand Angie a check or a wad of cash to contribute to the rent. She proudly recounted the time that even a dope fiend stopped by to throw money in the front door before briskly walking away. These moments were illustrative of the unspoken acknowledgement of the importance of their community space. It was modest in design but was open to anyone who wanted to join – in an area where new Black-owned businesses were sparse, they were a welcome change to the status quo.

Once I established the tentative nucleus of the story, I tried to limit shooting footage that didn't directly relate to the Orun Cultural Center's growth and their efforts to gain a foothold in the community. I continued to keep track of any additional events on the East side in the local paper while continuing to research old news programs about the area. My goal was to keep this short film short, and each added character I was introduced to brought with them new storylines to pursue. If I had recorded the history of the Mason's lodge next door, for example, I'd be opening up the story to a deeper and very different cultural evolution that could completely redirect the course of the film. Ultimately it was a question of scope within the time I was given, and I wanted to maintain a manageable amount of footage so that when it came time to edit I wouldn't be diverted in too many directions at once. I tend to over shoot, a necessary evil for



documentaries in the digital age, so a restriction on footage was a way to maintain focus in the moment.

A pattern emerged at Orun: each month Dorian and Angie would brainstorm to determine the necessary steps needed to get one of their visionary plans off the ground. For Angie, it was an organic garden and vegan soul food trailer. She was networking and negotiating with the landlord of the lot next door to transform the abandoned space into a community garden. Dorian was working on a community “Call to Action” event that would bring together elders and youth in the neighborhood to combat deep-rooted issues of accountability plaguing the community. Around mid-month they would have to shift their focus towards raising the \$2500 rent. Dorian used the back area of the cultural center space for his barbershop, but it wasn’t enough to subsidize the cost. Each month the fate of the community center was in flux, but somehow they were managing to stay afloat. I wondered if this journey would be compelling enough to sustain a short film, and since I didn’t have an editor, I relied on my shoot notes to help me visualize the story as I went along.

### **Modifying the Production Workflow**

During the fall of 2012, I began getting solicited by my classmates to produce their thesis films. I really enjoyed the creative aspect of producing and I wanted more narrative experience. Much like my decision to shoot my own film until I was comfortable handling the camera, my decision to produce additional thesis films was based largely around wanting a more well-rounded experience before I ventured back into the professional world. I also really enjoyed working with Anand Modi and

Catherine Licata, so working on their films was more of a collaboration than a labor exchange. In mid-2013 I also took on producing Annie Silverstein's thesis, another strong collaboration and big commitment. All three projects were ambitious in their own way, and in hindsight, I needed to be more regimented with my time. Though I kept up with the development at the Orun Center, it became difficult to log the footage on a regular basis, so I knew I'd have to reckon with the work I was creating for myself in post.

My casual approach to filming had its ups and downs. Everyone became accustomed to having the camera around all the time. Dorian and Angie were generous and were always open to an impromptu interview. A lot of the time I would just hang out and sometimes lend a hand if they needed it. The flipside was that I would often shoot without a clear objective in mind. Sometimes I would capture unexpected moments, and other times I would leave the center feeling like I had a lot of hard drive space but not much substance. On one occasion I was interviewing Dorian when we heard a loud bang on the wall. I followed him outside with the camera where Dorian calmly interrupted the arguing couple and asked them some questions about the hood. They were surprisingly open to being interviewed, and while they had differing opinions about the persisting issues in the Black community (The man expressed concern about racial profiling and police brutality, while the woman refuted the claim), they exuded a sense of detachment and powerlessness. They seemed shell-shocked, in a way. The landscape had changed, and they no longer belonged there. This scene wasn't particularly strong visually, and there were some distracting elements (the woman wasn't fully clothed, for example), that

I thought would detract from the moment. However, I knew that if given the time, I could capture the nuances of these emotionally charged scenes; it was just going to take a while.

### **Orun Changes Course**

After the holidays I checked back in with Dorian and found out that they were unable to afford the rent and would be moving out of the building at the end of January. They were considering moving out to a rural area to start a holistic commune/retreat space. By that point I had been following their story for about nine months and had accumulated a substantial amount of footage. In my mind what I had shot had begun to resemble a story that could translate on screen. It was a simple microcosm of the consequence of gentrification. Long time residents displaced and new businesses and non-profits struggle to survive without a steady stream of capital. On top of that Dorian and Angie had to dedicate an even greater effort to outreach because the African American community was dwindling so fast. They needed volunteers to help get the word out, volunteers to help organize events, and volunteers to raise money. I began to understand how impossible it is for a non-profit to function without significant contribution from grants. But it begged the question, what was the system lacking that an independent community cultural space did not have the means to survive long enough to serve the people who might benefit from it the most?

I accompanied Dorian and Angie out to Bastrop to check on a plot of land they were interested in buying. As I was shooting them walking through the woods planning this next phase in their lives, I envisioned how this scene might play out as the end of the

film. It felt hopeful, serene, and bittersweet. What I liked about the scene was that it reminded the audience that in Texas there were new frontiers to inhabit, and that in order to maintain an autonomous lifestyle you may have to be willing to move away from the city center and go off the grid. If Dorian and his family moved out to the periphery this ending would have said everything the film needed to say about displacement.

It was around this time that I began production on Catherine Licata's thesis film, followed by Anand Modi's and later, Annie Silverstein's. The experience of working on those three sets is beyond the scope of this paper. But I learned many lessons that I will carry on into my professional career. I stopped shooting regularly on my project and used whatever free time I had to review the footage that I had shot so far. It was a welcome break from production, a way to step back and from the work that I'd done to assess the footage. At that point I felt confident about the footage, but I was concerned that I didn't have enough coverage of the poignant moments to reveal the core of the Orun Center's mission. I decided to expand the film beyond the narrow radius of 12<sup>th</sup> St. to illuminate the other forces at play.

## **Visual Motifs**

### **Walking the Streets**

There were three other major visual elements that were intercut throughout the film to deconstruct the landscape of East Austin. The first was the “Hidden” East Austin Walking tour. The organizers were very open to allowing me to come along, and I was given the opportunity to introduce the project before the event began. These geographers and historians were an enthusiastic group with a well-meaning concern for the preservation of history, but I couldn’t help but notice the underlying irony of a group of academics exploring what used to be the hood. It was visually off-putting, as if they were explorers in a post-apocalyptic landscape. In one shot they’d look like a parade, in another, like a funeral procession. Early on I filmed a woman grabbing a plastic bag from a dog-poop dispenser nearby as the tour proceeded down the street towards the historic e. 11<sup>th</sup> street. It was clear that the dispenser was new, as was the manicured sidewalk, the condos, and the smoothly paved streets. This was the new environment. 11<sup>th</sup> St. was pristine.

I met Professor Roland Hayes walking along the tour and he welcomed a chance to share his thoughts. He was very concerned with the stories being told about the east side to the mainstream and he wanted to help change the conversation. In doing so, Hayes provided historical context, expressed passion for the past and future of the east side and provided a firm – yet fair – critique of the tour itself. All of this was over the course of 2 hours and 2 miles. He was also of the opinion that his own students at Austin Community College could have – and should have - benefited from the tour. He wasn’t

blasting the validity of the tour itself, but he was questioning the people it was meant to serve. It was a frustration that I heard echoed by community members throughout the East side –the history of the place wasn't being passed down to the next generation, and they were not benefiting from the rich sense of cultural identity that the older generation possessed. If the new kids didn't latch on and pass down, then the history would be lost.

I couldn't have asked for a better character to be on this tour. He literally provided an ongoing commentary as the tour proceeded, and he did so in such a way that was not disruptive but was subversive. As you could tell, I knew in the moment that at least some of his interview would make it into the final cut. He was a natural truth teller and I trusted his intentions. Unfortunately I didn't shoot his interviews very well because he was about seven inches taller than me. I was pointing the camera upward towards the sun, which made for an unpleasant composition. Hayes was somewhat soft spoken, which I assumed was because he was often standing near the group and didn't want to draw attention to himself. Ultimately I think his energy and personality outweighed the less than perfect visuals, and his message was essential: there was an urgent need to preserve the history before all was lost.

## **Juneteenth**

The second significant visual element was the Juneteenth parade. I had planned on shooting the event a year prior, back when it was scheduled to coincide with the opening of the new African American Cultural Heritage center, but I postponed the shoot when construction on the new building stalled. That summer, I was awarded a TFPF grant for Super 16mm Kodak film stock and processing at Alpha Cine. My classmate

Anand Modi pushed me to use the film stock at the parade and capture the event on film. After some initial trepidation about being able to pull it off, I opened up to the idea. East Austinites past and present have a very strong sense of local pride. Most of the original folks I encountered identified themselves by their zip code. The Juneteenth parade was a multilayered symbol of tradition, transformation, and celebration. It was one of the few times that the African American community on the East side could just *be*.

I enlisted Anand Modi, Roshan Murthy, Paavo Hanninen, and Hammad Rizvi to take on the task of shooting the live event with two Arri SRII cameras. If carrying heavy cameras and magazines in the heat wasn't enough, I also asked them to shoot at a high frame rate for the entirety of the parade, but to remain conscious of the footage count so that they didn't run out of film before the parade was over.



*Figure 1: Portrait from "Los Del Baile"*

We met the night before and I prepped the team with visual references to Cuban filmmaker Nicolás Guillén Landrián and René Clair's early surrealist film *Entr'Acte*<sup>4</sup>. I really liked the portrait

compositions of townspeople in his film *Los Del Baile*.<sup>5</sup> He beautifully captured

small voyeuristic moments of characters seemingly lost in their own thoughts, walking through the street before they turned

<sup>4</sup> *Entr'Acte*, directed by René Clair. (1924, France: Les Ballets Suedois, 1924)

<sup>5</sup> *Los Del Baile*, directed by Nicolás Guillén Landrián. (1965, Cuba: ICAIC, 1964)

abruptly and stared directly into the lens. He made strong statements about voyeurism, agency, and power. Landrián let us watch, but he also let the characters watch back.

Other essential coverage included high angle wide shots to display the scale of festivities and medium close up portraits. It would be impossible to avoid shots of parade bystanders waving to the camera, but I was hoping for candid moments of interaction between friends and family. The Juneteenth parade and celebration didn't resemble anything else in the rest of the city, and because of that it felt like (with the help of slow motion photography and grainy film) it had come from another dimension.

I chose to shoot some impromptu interviews on film, which turned out to be the most liberating part of the shoot day. After having shot endless meandering



*Figure 2: Portrait from Juneteenth Parade and Celebration*

hours of interviews on digital cameras, the time and cost restrictions of shooting on film forced me to get right to the point. Luckily my interview subjects didn't let my sense of



urgency affect their responses. Many people admired the cameras but no one seemed to notice or acknowledge the significance of shooting on film.

My camera team worked really hard to get ample footage for me to work with, and I was really pleased with the way it turned out. I had more than enough beautiful compositions and nearly everything was properly exposed. We were lucky enough to get an overcast day in the middle of summer, a time saver. There's a lot of vibrancy and life in that footage, and I think it resonates on a spiritual level, especially as coda to the film. On the whole the decision to shoot the parade on film really helped to elevate the entire piece. It raises the stakes when seen in contrast to the flat statistical news stories explaining the unstoppable migration into the city. If a tradition as powerful and long lasting as Juneteenth can be endangered by the changes, what will be the fate of cultural diversity in Austin?

Instead of packing up and storing the footage in a closet somewhere, I plan to donate it to the Austin History Center's African American archive. It's a small yet necessary gesture to add to the growing collection of historical documents at that institution. As we learned during the introductory scene of the walking tour, East Austin hasn't always been on the map, so it is important to remember that the documentation in itself has value that can live separate from the short film. I think the final product of the short film works as an artistic expression, but I think the super 16mm raw footage can have a life beyond just the short.

## **Adventures in Aerial Video**

I became interested in experimenting with aerial video after watching Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*. Cameras have become small and light enough to pull off crane-style shots while flying in remote-controlled drones. I really liked the idea of low flying helicopter shots to capture the changing landscape on the east side. After doing a bit of research on UAV (unmanned aerial vehicles) operators in the area, I found Robert Youens, of Camera Wings. He had posted a video online entitled *Beautiful Austin* that really showcased the drone's ability to produce smooth controlled images at both low and high altitudes. Robert was excited about working with me on this project, and we were able to schedule a session between his much higher paying commercial gigs.

I charted a general shot list over 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> streets and scheduled the shoot to begin at dawn so that we could capture the sun rising over the horizon. Anand Modi came out to assistant camera. Just like any other Director/DP relationship, it took some time for Robert and I to develop a working rapport and for me to fully grasp the limitations of the equipment. I learned that by law the drone always had to remain in sight, and that it was difficult to fly it below power lines for an extended period of time. Aside from that we had a lot of flexibility to experiment with altitude, angles and movement.

My favorite shot from that day was not on my shot list. Lola Stephens, owner of Nubian Queen Lola's Café, just happened to be riding her bike at dawn on 12<sup>th</sup> St. while we were shooting. We'd never met before then, but I knew that she lived on the block in a purple house wedged between an empty lot and a dive bar. She was really curious

about what we were up to, and I asked if she wouldn't mind being photographed. The shot of her riding her bike down Salina St. in the morning light with a teddy bear strapped to the basket was beautiful, serene and timeless all at once.



*Figure 3: Lola goes for a morning bike ride*

I had a great time shooting for this project for over a year, and I'm glad that I got to push the boundaries of what this project could look and feel like with varying mediums and camera styles. I knew that just around the corner, there was a long road of editing ahead of me and it filled me with dread.

## Post-Production

*...all we have left is the place the attachment to the place  
we still rule over the ruins of temples spectres of gardens  
and houses if we lose the ruins nothing will be left.*

-Zbigniew Herbert<sup>6</sup>

Post-production was challenging for this project for both creative and technical reasons. I opted to use Avid to edit the piece in order to re-familiarize myself with the program before graduation. The complexity of the Avid interface forced me to think deeply about each cut I made, and unlike Final Cut, Avid required a commitment to organization in order to function properly. Not to mention Avid had some amazing features, like the ability to link scripts with video time code that would have improved the process if the tedious work was done on the front end. I embarked on the editing process with a realistic sense that it was going to take a lot of time to transcode, transcribe, and organize the footage. I didn't anticipate that the combination of re-learning Avid and managing such a large amount of footage would nearly kill my creative process.

It was ambitious of me to attempt to produce, shoot, and direct my thesis film, but it was flat out unwise for me to try to edit it as well. I was too emotionally close to the subjects, too critical of the way I shot it, and too much of a procrastinator to get the meat and potatoes out of the way early so that I could spend significant time shaping the aesthetic. Nevertheless, I pushed through the organizational stage and even cut together some early sequences before making an executive decision to switch to Final Cut. By then it was fairly late in the game, and so instead of starting from scratch, I picked up

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<sup>6</sup> Herbert, Zbigniew. "Report from the Beseiged City" Poem-hunter.com. January 3, 2003.

where I left off. I imported the footage that I knew would make it to the final piece and started to cut from there. Once I began showing assemblies to my committee, I tried as best I could to detach myself from the material.

I had a relatively simple chronological structure in mind early on that revolved around the Orun Center's opening and closing over the course of nine months. What I quickly realized when I tried to edit according to this plan was that the scenes weren't quite coming together at pace that would work in a short film, and I certainly didn't have enough material to warrant a feature length film. I decided to restructure the film to incorporate more elements from the East Austin Walking Tour and the Juneteenth parade as a way to build out the world of the film, and I found newscasts that provided a greater context for what was happening to the city.

When I was feeling stuck, I met with Nathan Duncan and he encouraged me to consider the visual of people walking through the streets as a framing device. I worked and re-worked this idea before settling on a structure that floated between scenes without a solid trajectory. After getting a round of feedback I restructured again, this time with a bit more balance. I was beginning to understand why it took years to edit feature length documentaries. In the final three weeks I was drastically changing the cut every few days, and it wasn't a particularly pleasant experience. At this point I was not only exhausted but I was losing sight of the finished film. With the help and steadfast encouragement of my friends and the members of my committee, I unearthed a cut that touched on themes of displacement, cultural resistance, and collective memory, but was firmly grounded in the present. On a personal note, I needed the most positive re-

enforcement from my peers at this time. One of the many drawbacks of editing your own work is that the film becomes the central core from which all other anxieties come from. In other words, not having an editor meant I couldn't begin working on my next project. This made the process feel all the more impossible. I was lucky to have a constant support system of family and friends to cheer me on.

The Orun Center's Art fundraiser scene begins with a shot of vivid graphic painting. Three images of bondage, three periods in time, punctuated with the words Present. Present. Present. I tried to echo this work in the one surreal transitional scene, after the scene of the African American Cultural and Heritage Center's inaugural celebration. We see an image of the yellow shotgun house, a relic of the past memorialized in the present, followed by Queen Lola taking her early morning ride, and we end on a shot of a single man standing in his front yard. Present, present, present. All three shots represented different ways of looking at the same issue – how do people maintain an identity and a history against an unstoppable force of cultural upheaval? For me this abstract transition was connected geographically and in temporal space. I hope that my next piece can build upon that style.

## **Conclusion**

When I was getting close to having a final cut, I began to notice connections that were buried in earlier versions. Sheryl Cole's speech emphasizing the amount of 'fortitude' that it took for Thomas Dedrick, a former slave, to purchase land, while Dorian expressed that same amount of necessary fortitude to survive in the neighborhood. There were also more subtle symbols, like the prominence of the color red and the presence of the yellow shotgun house in the early scenes. It was interesting to discover that certain choices were working themselves out on a subconscious level. I wrestled with balancing the direct with the abstract, and the amount of information to give the audience to hook them in. When I hit a wall, I would cut on gut instinct and analyze it after.

Eric Friend did a fantastic job on the mix of the film, and he generously imparted knowledge along the way about the amazing ProTools plugins that helped to clean up some of my troublesome audio. Although we couldn't go as far with sound as I had with my sci-fi shorts, Eric was open to experimenting with rumbles, chirps, and reverb to emphasize an underlying tension. I didn't end up using as much of Dorian and Angie's journey to build the cultural center as I had originally planned, and I still think their story has potential to develop into its own piece if I continue to shoot. But on the whole I just hope that the audience is intrigued enough by the story to find ways to see the cohesion through the fragments, and that they feel motivated to complete the circle on their own.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **PRODUCTION & POST-PRODUCTION TIMELINE**

2011	SEP	Begin research and seeking funding
2012	JAN	Research and character search
	MAY	Preliminary Interviews, begin shooting cinéma vérité footage
	JUNE	Apply for TFPF grant
	JULY	Continue research and interviews
2013	JAN	Transcode, log and transfer footage
	FEB - MAY	Edit Rough cut
	MAY	Pre-production for Super 16mm Juneteenth Parade shoot
	JUNE	Shoot Juneteenth Parade
	JUNE	Film processing and transfer
	JULY	Aerial footage shoot with Robert Youens
	JULY	Feedback from peers and committee
	AUG	Lock picture, color correction, sound mix
	SEP	Film Festival submissions



## APPENDIX B

### ***WE WILL ALWAYS BE HERE*** TRANSCRIPT

*Music*

00:06:00 – 00:45:00

**Dorian (VO):** It happened overnight. One day I came to work and the next day I came to work and it was like different. The streets was paved, the bicycle lanes were put in, the next week they had bus stops with covers on ‘em and shade and art exhibits around ‘em and this has been never the case on the East side. When it started I was seeing it in Houston, I was seeing it in New York, I was seeing it in California, I was seeing it even in Seattle, Washington, I was seeing it everywhere. But I noticed that here it happened extremely fast.

*Title: We Will Always Be Here*

00:00:50:00 – 00:01:35:00

**Dorian:** Austin is behind and I think it’s because of the population that’s here. The few people that are here, and the people that have come into something and left. I see the effect that I made on a lot of people, man, and I’ve been in this community a long time. And I did it because I left. I went to his hometown in Atlanta and saw something that I’ve never seen amongst Black people. So I figured hey, I could do that too, that’s all I needed to do was see it, there’s a lot of people who just needed to see it, they needed to see an example. And that did it for me I came right back here and opened up my first book store and medicinal medicine shop.

00:01:35;00 – 00:01:55;00

**Dorian:** I wonder how long that we can really exist in this community that's turning into a White community, I just don't know. So I wonder what's gonna happen to the Orun Center when all the Black people are gone and we're pretty much there, what's gonna happen?

*Transition – Juneteenth footage*

*Music*

00:02:25;00 – 00:03:10;00

**Andrea:** What we're going to do today, everyone should have a copy of this map and in red it highlights our major stopping points.

**Tour guide:** There's a lot of maps that the East side was left out of, really. The Sanbourne Fire Insurance maps, before a certain date, East Austin wasn't even shown on it. But if you look at this eastern part of the birds-eye here, here's the legation pictured in the little window, in the little bubble, and just to the north of us this is the area that we're going to go right now and kinda talk a little bit more. So if that's a good segue for us?

**Andrea:** Yes, we're gonna need everybody to follow.

00:03:23;00 – 00:03:44;00

**Roland:** In the past ten years this area has exploded. And a lot of that is uh, well you would have to have been here before then to see the nuances about why it's like it is. But for the people who lived here, somebody needs to tell that side. It's not anger, it's just never been told.

*Music*

00:04:08;00 – 00:04:32;00

**Andrea:** This was a major African American business corridor up through the 1950s which means your florists, your African American-owned grocery stores, your hairdresser, your everything could be found along this corridor. We see it now as, there's a lot of nice old houses and not much going on. Once, everything was going here.

*00:04:35;00 – 00:04:46;11*

**Tour Member:** I had no idea it was just being developed like that like when you walk around and look at how much it's being developed, it's like boy, there's a lot more we need to talk about.

*Music*

*00:04:52;00 – 00:06:16;07*

**Roland:** Some of this stuff has some evilness attached to it, has some bad things about to it. Racism, bigotry. Now I know you don't want to talk about it in that way, but it's a fact. When he was talking about those houses that didn't have water or paved streets, that wasn't an accident. When he said 1928? There's an ordinance that the City of Austin had in 1928 where they told Black people that if they wanted to benefit from those kinds of services, we're only going to be able to provide services for you in a central location, so one place. So the high school was here and Blacks wanted their kids to get an education. So that's where they put the sewages, electricity, gaslines...so that created East Austin in a way. But there were shotgun houses all up and down here, and when urban renewal came, they moved all those black folks out of here, and they had no where to go. They had to go further East to a place called Hog Pen. But I don't know how you tell that on a tour. People don't wanna take a course in history they just wanna see some of the sights. So on that street over there, that's where some of the principals and educated black folks...some of their families are still over there. So to me that would be something of merit. That's what I would think. Am I messing up your tape?

*Music*

00:06:24;00 – 00:06:50;00

**Newscaster:** Lots of people who visit Austin end up wanting to move here. In the past two years alone, more than 150,000 have moved to Austin – that’s more people than the entire city of Waco.

**Newscaster (VO):** We wanted to know the fastest selling areas around Austin. Prices jumped the most in East Austin between MLK and Riverside – 17%. But they’re still the most affordable, with the median at \$205,000.

*Music*

00:07:11;00 – 00:07:45;00

**Joel:** I’ve always thought – ‘we have the space and we have a lot of artists that come by’. Here we are, the night of the show. It would be nice just to make that another facet of the center, is just also make it an art venue. Possibly even transform this garage into studio space if we can.

**Dorian:** All of this is an attempt to raise the money for the center so that we can make the deadline by the 13<sup>th</sup> to pay the fees so that we can hold our space.

*Music*

00:08:29;00 – 00:08:45;00

**Dorian:** We from this neighborhood, we from what’s going on and we’ve been through the struggle. So it’s not a play thing, it’s not just activism cuz we wanna be down. We’re in this for life. So we need the people’s support, please come out and support us and let’s keep this place open. Ase.

*Music*

00:08:51;00 – 00:09:11:00

**Newscaster 1:** There’s no question right now, Austin is a seller’s market.

**Newscaster 2:** Yea, even with buyers spending tens of thousands of dollars over asking price, new figures out today that probably surprise you. The number of home sales last month up 32% compared to 2012, that's a nine-year record. And prices are up 8%. It has some asking whether the boom will become a bubble.

*00:09:15:00 – 00:09:49:00*

**Mayor Lee Leffingwell:** Welcome everyone, as you know today we're here to celebrate the grand opening of the African American cultural and Heritage facility here in Austin, Texas. It's been a long time coming. What we're celebrating is this new 4000 sq. ft building that will provide a place for youth of all ages and arts organizations to meet and to practice, to learn and to perform. It's also a place to promote tourism, and a place to foster the development of African American businesses.

*00:09:49:00 – 00:10:17:00*

**Mayor Pro Tem Sheryl Cole:** Hamilton Dietrich was originally a slave. And when he became free after 1865, sometime between 1865 and 1870. He had the vision and the fortitude to purchase this land. We must not forget how important it is to invest in land.

*00:10:17:00 – 00:11:08:21*

**Justin:** For this building right over here we have a shotgun home, shotgun homes was where people of African descent lived in after slavery. And so we have people over there right now going in that home and it's just interesting to me because now it's 2013 and this African American cultural heritage center has a monument of a shotgun home in front of it. And a lot of African Americans, a lot of people of color, Latinos, have been pushed out of this area. So to have an African American heritage cultural center in an area that has been heavily gentrified – I don't want to say it's a slap in the face, but it doesn't sit well with me. Because, as the speakers were saying earlier, we so much more, and so much further to go. We have so much more work to do.

*Music*

00:12:00;09 – 00:12:43;00

**Dorian:** How's the family?

**Neighbor:** They alright. I just came down here for a couple of days, try to find somewhere to live.

**Dorian:** Well you let us know how we can help ok? We're getting ready to leave here at the end of this month.

**Neighbor:** Why ya'll leavin'?

**Dorian:** We can't afford it no more. And we're going out to 11 acres so like when you need somewhere to stay, you'll be right out there in the country with us. I wish I was on there right now.

**Neighbor:** They raising the rent cuz it's the East side, all these white folks.

**Dorian:** You already know how they're doing it, they're trying to get us all the way out. They're trying to get us all the way out. Even the brother's in the hood on the street ain't from here.

**Neighbor:** If I had a house on the East side, if I owned my house, I wouldn't sell it. I wouldn't sell it for shit. They're gonna have white folks all around me but I know every weekend I'm having a hood party (laughs).

**Dorian:** Right, right, for real.

*Music*

00:13:00;00 – 00:13:28;09

**Dorian:** When you struggling everyday to pay the rent like I am in this building it's hard on your motivation, it's to stay motivated, it's hard to be creative, it's hard to be inspired, it's hard to keep going. You have to have an extreme amount of fortitude to continue on in these conditions.

00:13:29:00 – 00:13:59:00

**Angela:** There's a lot of things I would have did different in the beginning. I wouldn't have taken no place for \$2500 on 12<sup>th</sup> St. right next to dope fiend central. They got us paying gentrification prices for this space. So I just kind of, I was outnumbered and I did the best that I could while we were here, but I kinda predicted it honestly, I knew it would come to this.

*Music*

00:14:55:00 – 00:15:27:00

**Kent:** I met my wife twenty-two years ago in this park. With that came eight children, and I married her twenty years so that's a good thing. I remember being eleven years old myself, I was walking up that hill when my grandmother passed. Just so many memories, I have loved ones, I have birthdays we celebrate on June 19<sup>th</sup>. And it's just a good way for the community to show support, come out and have fun and fellowship and celebrate the actual meaning of June 19<sup>th</sup> itself.

*Music*

00:15:30:00 – 00:15:48:00

**Jaquese:** I don't know the roots of it, but I've been doing it every since I was, you know younger so I can understand that it's important like for my family. So we celebrate it. A lot of people don't, But we do.

*Music*

00:16:11:00 – 00:16:35:00

**Kei:** We're just celebrating the Black day, Black power.

**Friend 1:** The day the slaves was freed.

**Friend 2:** Because it's a lot of girls in Austin and it's real hot and we get to drive in drops and stuff

**Director:** What do you like about Austin?

**Friend 1:** I just love it.

**Kei:** We just love it, especially the summertime.

*Music*

00:16:35;00 – 00:17:15;00

**Theresa:** The community has greatly changed, we used to have a thriving Black community and that's kind of gone away. And so when you see a day like this, like Juneteenth it's a good thing. We do have more diversity in the community, and that is a good thing and a bad thing. The good thing is that it does bring more ideas, things that you wouldn't do in the past. But then also you kind of lose your culture that you did have. You don't have the small Mom and Pop businesses that you had, so they're kind of gone away. And every time you see a little square of land somebody put something there and it's not one of us, it doesn't look like us. So the community has definitely changed.

00:17:19;00 – 00:17:33;19

**CJ:** This is a Black folks heritage, generation. Black folks been in this area for hundreds of years. That's where they put us at. And we're close to downtown. Now, everybody wants to come downtown.

*Music*

00:17:45;00 – 00:18:18;01

**Justin VO:** This land right here presently that we sit on is monumental for the work that has been done. It's very sad to me that ancestors who gave their blood, sweat and tears, descendants of those ancestors have been pushed out of this area. In the future I see people coming together and waking up and seeing that we cannot make a better city, make a better community without collectively being engaged with one another. But you'll have to stay tuned for that one.



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## VITA

Monique is an Austin-based filmmaker hailing from Long Island, NY. In 2004 she co-directed and produced *Still Black, At Yale*, a short documentary that screened at film festivals and educational conferences including the Pan African Film Festival and the San Francisco Black Film Festival. Monique produced educational on-air and web content at Nickelodeon for four years before pursuing an MFA at the University of Texas-Austin. She has produced four student short films including *SKUNK*, *Tiny Tape Recorder*, *A Late Evening in the Future*, and *Housekeeping* and has co-written and directed short narratives and documentaries (*The Fire Inside*, *Dark Matters*, *The Becoming Box*, *We Will Always Be Here*). *The Becoming Box* won the narrative award at the 2012 International Black Film festival of Nashville and will make its television premiere on the Aspire Network in 2014. She has received support from the Texas Filmmaker Production Fund and Dina Sherzer Documentary Fund. Monique leads youth media skills workshops with the Black Media Council in Austin. She is co-founder of *The Fit Cycle*, a fitness and wellness web series that has been recognized in print, online and on TV– with Forbes calling her work the “Smartest, Sexiest Workout Videos Ever.”

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This (report) was typed by the author.